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ABSTRACT

The need to improve literacy in inner-city schools is a phenomenon at least a quarter-century old. Miami University of Ohio began the Teens for Literacy program in 1989. The program sets up, with the cooperation of a school principal, a team of middle school and junior high school students to promote literacy in their schools or communities. Five inner-city schools in southwestern Ohio cities currently participate. Principals select a team of four or five students of different races and backgrounds. Each team writes a proposal explaining what they plan to do during the year. Teams come to the university for an hour every other month for a meeting. Projects have included a Big Brother/Big Sister reading program, a huge billboard, videos promoting literacy, reading to senior citizens, and working with other teachers. All teams engage in tutoring their peers, including the multi-handicapped. Brief reports from students demonstrate the reactions and insights of students in the program. The program costs between $6,000 and $7,000 dollars per year. Students are paid $5 a month for each month they work. Teacher-liaisons are paid $500, and each school receives about $500 to purchase materials. (Suggestions from parents, a list of publications for parents, and titles of two reports of additional interest are included.) (SR)

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Teens for Literacy in Inner-City Schools

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This audio-taped talk was presented at the 38th Annual Convention of the International Reading Association, San Antonio, April 28, 1993.

The need to improve literacy in our inner-city schools is not a new phenomenon. The seventh president of the International Reading Association--William D. Sheldon--issued a clarion call a quarter of a century ago. In a keynote address at the 25th annual reading conference at the University of Pittsburgh, Sheldon observed:

> During the past several decades the United States has become an Urban Society. Once proud cities, populated by a relatively small, upward mobile society, have become crowded by the rural poor of our nation. Small slum areas, once inhabited by newly arrived immigrants from various European countries, have been replaced by huge ghettos, filled by poverty stricken blacks from the deep South, Spanish-speaking farmers and villagers from Puerto Rico and dislocated poor whites from such areas as Appalachia.

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> The three major groups which have occupied the decaying center city have one characteristic in common. They are poor. Out of their poverty has come such related problems as crime, disease, transiency and illiteracy. It is with the issue of illiteracy and its effect on the schools of every city that we must deal.
>
> In every city in the United States . . . the alarm has been sounded about the condition of the ghetto schools. The problem of reading has been mentioned over and over again as a major issue of these schools for the poverty stricken of the ghetto.
>
> --Sheldon, 1969

He goes on and describes some of his work in urban schools in Syracuse, Rochester, and New York City.

Two years earlier, Edward R. Fagan, who became Vice-President of the National Council of Teachers of English, began a chapter in a book he wrote:

> Given a set of outdated textbooks which must be used and a ninth-grade group of 32 boys who ranged in age from 15 to 21, who ranged in I.Q. from 85 to 140, whose ethnic composition is 75 percent nonwhite . . . and whose hatred of school is documented via police records of habitual truancy, what teaching strategies can be used to keep these students interested enough in learning to prevent them from making the classroom a battleground?

> That was the question I faced some years ago when I accepted the task of teaching English, grades 9 through 12, to boys in a Wisconsin reform school. The lessons I learned during my two-year stay at that school have never been forgotten and have been applied to both high school and college classes to good advantage over the last fifteen years. When I use "to good advantage," I mean that the students at both the high school and college levels increased their awareness of English as a discipline and frequently changed their attitude about education from negative to positive.

Fagan says that "content was not 'watered down.' Students did not 'play games,' and the teacher did not 'stoop to the student's level' in the derogatory sense of those expressions. Rather, students increased English skills as measured by standardized tests . . . and shifted from negative to positive vectors concerning education . . . according to members of a visiting team from the Wisconsin State Education Department." (Fagan, 1967)

I can vouch for the integrity of what Fagan and Sheldon say, having enjoyed the good fortune of knowing both--Ed Fagan first as my supervisor when I was a student teacher working on my masters degreee at what was then called Albany State Teachers College, and Bill Sheldon, when I began work as a doctoral student at the Reading and Language Arts Center, which he directed, at Syracuse University. The problems they addressed a quarter of a century ago continue to remain a blight on our political, social, and educational landscape.

Before talking about how we are contributing to the educational landscape, let me preface my own remarks by mentioning where Miami University is not--it is not in Florida. It is in southwestern Ohio, where the Miami Indians used to live, and the university periodically renews an agreement with the Miami Indians for permission to use their name. The university has about 15,000 students on its main campus in Oxford and several thousand on its Hamilton and Middletown campuses. The university began in 1809 and is famous for a number of things. Whatever your feelings about fraternities, Miami is where they started. It also has the first college newspaper. Miami is described as one of the eight best buys in public undergraduate education in the most recent edition of *The Public Ivys*. Another book, *Miami of Ohio: Cradle of Coaches*, cites the many great football personalities, such as Woody Hayes, Ara Parseghian, Weeb Eubank, and Bo Schembechler, who have either played or coached at Miami.

We began Teens for Literacy four years ago with three schools in southwestern Ohio. It is a simple and powerful idea. What I propose to do here today is tell you about it as clearly as I can so that, if you wish, you can emulate it in your own school or system.

Four years ago Henry Jung, Associate Director of Divisional Support in the University Relations Development Office, approached me with a wonderful request. He said that he knows a family who would like to make a small gift to improve literacy. Can I come up with a novel idea?

I spoke to each of my colleagues and, gradually, the idea emerged that we now call Teens for Literacy.

Essentially what we--or I, to be specific--do is set up with the cooperation of a school principal a team of students to promote literacy in

their school or community. A secondary objective is to encourage the students to consider teaching as a profession. We focus on middle- and junior high schools because this is where we think we can make the greatest impact in meeting our objectives to improve literacy. This also is the time in the lives of these children when they are vulnerable to negative as well as positive influences inside and outside school.

To begin the project four years ago I visited three inner-city schools--one in Cincinnati, one in Hamilton, and one in Middletown, all cities in southwestern Ohio. Greater Cincinnati, headquarters of Procter and Gamble, has about 300,000 people and is about one hour from Miami University. Hamilton and Middletown each has about 70,000 people and each is about a half hour from the main campus of Miami University. (I say main campus because there are campuses of the university in both Hamilton and Middletown.) One of Hamilton's leading industries is Mosler, Inc., which for over a hundred years has been making locks, safes and vaults; a sign leading into Hamilton announces that the city is the Safe Capital of the World. A leading industry in Middletown is Armco Steel.

When I first visited the schools four years ago I asked each principal if he or she would select four or five students to form a team. I thought a four- or five-person team would be workable. For each team I requested students of different races and backgrounds who worked well with others and who had leadership potential. I also asked for a teacher- or counselor-liaison to oversee the program in each school.

In the smaller cities of Hamilton and Middletown I simply picked up the phone, called, made an appointment and visited with the principals. Because Cincinnati is a larger district, I had to go through channels--first

phone calls, then a letter or two to key administrators in the central office, before receiving the green light to go ahead.

Each team writes a proposal in which they explain what they plan to do, and how they plan to do it, during the year. The teams share their proposals at the first meeting--usually in October--at Miami.

The teams come to the university for an hour every other month--from 1 until 2 p.m. The first half hour focuses on what each team is doing to improve literacy in their school or community. During the last half hour we visit a selected part of the university. Our first visit is usually to a dormitory; later visits are to the art museum and the library. The final visit, usually in April, is a two-hour luncheon (from 11:30 to 1:30) during which the teams report the highlights of their activities through the year.

During the luncheon the 10- to 15-minute reports range from a student in each team saying a few words to one team making a slide presentation with musical accompaniment. This particular team tends to do a variety of activities in their building which houses two schools--their middle school and an elementary school. (Their middle school also houses Juvenile Court, which meets there on Wednesday mornings.) This team has also set up a Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Program. They also select and display posters through both schools before, during, and after Right to Read Week.

Another school's team once designed and arranged for a huge billboard promoting literacy to be set up on a highway leading into their city. This team also develops videos promoting literacy and has weekly announcements about books and authors in the school newspaper. A third team reads to senior citizens. A fourth has established a 1,000-minute

Reading Club. A fifth works with other teachers. All teams engage in tutoring their peers including the multi-handicapped. All these activities have a ripple effect.

Some students provide written as well as oral reports and poignantly share their astonishment upon realizing some of their friends can hardly read. Here are some of their brief reports. I share them not because they are accolades but because they provide insight from students in two schools--Vail Middle School and Garfield Junior High in, respectively, Middletown and Hamilton.

> During the last six months or so I have been involved in helping kids from my school learn to read. At first it was a real eye opener to me that people my age could not read. I had heard about children in our country being illiterate but I never expected to see people my age in the same situation. This really hit home.
>
> I hope my work in the program has really made an impact on my particular student in reading. I think this program helped me also in realizing just how important it is to learn how to read. I am truly thankful to God for blessing me with the ability to read. I hope the student I have worked with will bloom into a good reader so that the work we have put forth will have paid off.--Brad

> When I first started tutoring I thought it would be something real easy to do. I was wrong and I took it as a challenge to make it easy. The young man I tutor doesn't like or want to

read at all. Since he likes sports, I would read a sports article to myself and say to him, "Wow! Look at this article!" And he'd want to read it but I told him he had to read it out loud. . . . . Now we're best friends. I help him to read and he'll come over to my house and lift weights with me and I also have put him on a diet. This young man use to weigh 220. Now he weighs 180. I have helped him read better and he's helped me in many weighs (sic).--Todd

I am a very lucky person to be a part of Teens for Literacy. My experience has been both challenging and enjoyable. I must admit I was very overwhelmed by how a child just a year younger than myself can't read any better than my seven year old sister. These past weeks I have noticed small changes, but like the boy I tutor, I get frustrated too. However, I never put him down or let him know that I am frustrated. So I think that even if he is able to sound out one word, or read one story, I know we have both succeeded.--Deanna

Tutoring students once a week has been a great experience. I really admire teachers for having such patience. I would easily get frustrated when they couldn't learn vocabulary and tried to memorize the words. Each time I'd visit the class I'd teach several students and I learned things about each one. Despite the fact that they were always stalling to work on reading, they all look forward to seeing me. I think it would be a good idea to have the students write more stories and

paragraphs to improve their skills. Everyone should have such a wonderful opportunity to work with less fortunate students. Maybe then people would appreciate their gift of being able to read.--Amy

My Teens for Literacy group has gone to Miami University several times this year to meet with other groups and discuss what we do in Teens for Literacy. We also learn about Miami. Once when we went we toured a library and another time we went to the Campus Avenue Building to have students from the Office of Learning Assistants (sic) talk to us about tutoring. A few weeks ago I wrote an article about the 1,000 Minute Club for a newsletter. The 1,000 Minute Club encourages students to read by offering them rewards such as a free book and a field trip to a play for reading for 1,000 minutes. I have been very busy this year in Teens for Literacy and I have enjoyed being active and helping people.--Donna

Every Wednesday I tutor a DH [developmentally handicapped] student. Before our first meeting, I made sight word flashcards. When I flashed each in front of him, I realized he couldn't read any of them. So I set a goal. That goal was for him to learn how to read <u>half</u> of the sight words. We started out--words, letters and sounds for over a month. Then finally, one day, he not only got half of them right, he got all of them right! I had done it. I taught him to read!"--Kim

My experiences with Teens for Literacy has been both challenging and rewarding. When Mrs. Oswalt asked me to be on the team I did not know what to think; but I took the challenge. I was introduced to Mrs. Purdy's class and began my work with them. Every Wednesday I went to her class and started out helping one boy who had some learning disabilities. He progressed in his work and I began to help the whole class. They all had some problems understanding words and had difficulty putting the words on paper. I worked with meanings and pronunciation of words so they could better understand them.

The students seemed to enjoy me being there. They accepted the way I taught and by doing that it was easier for them to learn their material. I am very glad I had the chance to help these individuals and hope I made an impression on their lives.--Josh

. . . Many of the students I've worked with are often stereotyped, but from what I've witnessed they are just like the rest of us: they can laugh, cry, and most of all learn. By continuing this program others will see this too. . . .--Latresha

In Teens for Literacy I deal with only one student. He is very pleasant to work with. So far I haven't experienced any emotions of frustration. Tutoring this person has helped me appreciate that I am fortunate enough to be able to read.

Sometimes I possibly wonder if I am helping the individual. I explained to him why I was tutoring him; that it was my own free will not something that someone made me do. I think that boosted his self-esteem to know that someone out there really cared enough to help him with his reading skills. I wonder if he looks forward to Wednesdays so he can receive help with his reading.

By the end of this school year I want to look back and exclaim, "He sure has progressed amazingly well."--Amy

Some students even write to a member of the family that has funded Teens for Literacy:

Dear Desta,

Being able to participate in such a wonderful program was extremely rewarding for me. I believe that illiteracy is a great problem in our world. Not having the ability to write one's own name or even recognize it when written is overwhelming. Having the gift of reading and writing is more precious than gold. To be able to give or help someone else with the "gift" is very gratifying.

Thank you for funding this terrific program. The kids we taught were not the only ones to receive something.

Enthusiastically,

Shelbi

Even one of the counselor-liaisons who worked in one of the Cincinnati inner-city schools wrote a letter:

> Words don't seem adequate for the year-long activities, support for our own project, and the final luncheon and tour! There has been a double edge to our participation in Teens for Literacy! The respect for reading and enthusiasm for books have grown with a great deal of pride among our students. Surely, it will continue to flourish next year.
> As important, the junior high students became familiar and comfortable at a beautiful, prestigious university. Meeting professors, administrators, college students and visiting campus sites have afforded a "new" possibility in their lives--college education. Your patience and humble behind-the-scenes direction will make a difference for young people who might have never considered college.

These letters and other items of interest are in a photographic essay that we add to through the years.

We began with three schools four years ago. My hope is to add a school a year. Right now we are up to five schools--the same number we had last year. Because I spend about five days a year in each of the schools, I need to work out a system so that I can add a school a year and continue to provide the same attention to all the schools in Teens for Literacy.

Two days from today--Friday--we will have our annual near-the-end-of-school-year luncheon. There will be about forty-five people at the luncheon: each school will send some seven people--the four or five students on the school's team, the teacher-liaison, and the principal. The remaining ten who are invited include mostly university people--Marvin Lawrence from the Dean's Office, several people dealing with minority affairs, the chair of the department of teacher education, a photographer and news reporter to spread the good word, a few interested colleagues and students and, of course, Henry Jung, who obtains the gifts from families to fund Teens for Literacy.

During last year's luncheon Jim McCoy, director of admissions for the university, came to the luncheon and gave each student a Miami University tee shirt; I've made arrangements for that precedent to continue this year.

When I realized the date of this talk was two days before this year's luncheon, I thought how nice it would be if it were the other way around--first the luncheon and then the talk. That way I could more successfully capture the spirit of what the teens have engaged in this year. But one has to live in the real world, and that includes working around the restrictions and mandates--such as week-long tests, etc.--to which public schools are subjected. It also means, incidentally, beginning and ending our meetings at the university on time because the students have many other obligations--basketball, cheerleading, football, school buses, homework.

How much does all this cost? Between $6,000 and $7,000. I pay the students $5 a month for each month they work. Each teacher-liaison is paid $500. Each school receives about $500 to purchase any materials they need. The purchases range from books and posters to audio- and

videotapes and software. One school sets aside some of their money to purchase tickets to end the school year with visits to the Museum of Natural History and the domed, wrap-around sight-and-sound OMNIMAX Theater in the renovated Union Terminal in Cincinnati. Other expenses we incur include the cost of pizza and other refreshments for the first half-hour of our bi-monthly meetings and a university photographer from time to time. I haven't taken any money although I intend to do so for the cost of travelling to and from the schools in the near future.

One mistake I made the first year was that I ended up with three teams one of which had not four or five students but nine! What happened was that the principal was so delighted with the idea that he suggested four or five students to participate one semester and the others to participate in the spring semester. But it didn't work out that way because the first team liked it so much they wanted to continue through the whole year.

The problem that too-large teams creates is one of transportation from their school to the university. While it is easy to fit four or five students into a car, for nine or ten you need a van. That first year I rented a van from the university to accommodate the interests of that one particular school.

With the help of our teacher-liaisons and the school principals we plan to reach out more to the parents and guardians. We also plan to follow our Teens for Literacy graduates as they progress through schools and into higher education. Reaching out and following through will not be easy for if there is one thing that is constant in inner-city schools (and maybe life in general), it's change. Sometimes change can be uplifting, but it can also be a bit demoralizing. I first noticed this phenomenon of

change thirty years ago when I taught in inner-city high schools in my hometown of Utica, New York, and for three years in Rochester, New York. In Rochester, in addition to my being the reading teacher, I had Regents and non-Regents classes in English. In New York State, as many of you know, students planning to go to college take Regents Examinations. In each Regents class I would have the names of thirty students, give or take a couple, in my Roll Book at the end of the school year. But I would have about fifty names in each non-Regents class. Even though there will still thirty students in each of the classes, the non-Regents students moved more often--sometimes away and back within the same school year. Since the beginning of Teens for Literacy, only about half the teachers and principals are in the same schools they were in four years ago. Sometimes the change is even more drastic: one of our inner-city schools will be converted this summer into the Offices of the Board of Education. So following students, most of whom have moved on, will not be easy. But as my father used to say, nothing good comes easily. Since this may not be easy, I'm trusting that it'll be good.

References

Fagan, Edward R. (1967). Literature and the Disadvantaged, *English and the Disadvanged.* Scranton, Pennsylvania: International Textbook Company.

Sheldon, William D. (1969). Problems of Reading Instruction in an Urban Society, *Reading in an Urban Society,* a Report of the Twenty-Fifth Annual Conference and Course on Reading, University of Pittsburgh, ed., Donald L. Cleland.

Notes

In visiting the Teens for Literacy schools I sometimes meet with parents. One such occasion was last week. I had been invited to the school's third informal Breakfast with the Principal. The breakfast was coordinated by the school's Parental Involvement Committee. Over coffee and donuts the parents shared many ideas which were jotted onto papers taped to the wall. Some examples follow. **How to Reach Parents**: 1) Put breakfast dates on school calendar and in school handbook; 2) Have one early mailing with all the breakfast dates for the school year; 3) Have reminders brought home by children the rest of the year; 4) Have a phone network; 5) Use guilt. **Regarding children**: 1) Encourage them to understanding that education is important, 2) they are responsible for their actions; 3) they are responsible for their learning; 4) Sign agreements. **Regarding parenting**, suggestions include 1) Helping parents who want to help their children with their homework; 2) Helping parents who want to know how to tutor; 3) Signing agreements; 4) Having a Parents Center in the school--(with donated paint and a carpet from business establishments, a center for parents to come and relax has been completed this week in this school); 5) Meeting teachers and seeing what is going on through their eyes. **Regarding teachers and principals**, suggestions include 1) Providing a list of all the activities and support available to children; 2) Having a choice in discipline options; 3) Adopting a teacher; 4) Trusting and respecting teachers and principal; 5) Knowing where the principal stands on issues.

Publications for parents are available from diverse sources: American Association of School Administrators (*101 Ways Parents Can Help*

Students Achieve); American Guidance Service in Circle Pines, Minnesota (*The Parent's Handbook*), The Australian Council for Educational Research in Victoria (*Parenting Teenagers in the 1990s*); The Center for the Study of Reading in Urbana, Illinois (*10 Ways to Help Your Children Become Better Readers*); The Lilly Endowment (*Progressions: Building Communities of Readers: An Occasional Report*); The Literacy Connection in Columbus, Ohio (*Reading and Writing: Where It All Begins*); Ohio Department of Education (*Parents as Partners*); Reading Is Fundamental in Washington, D.C. (*Encouraging Young Readers, Helping Your Children Become Readers, Reading is Fun, To Ride a Butterfly*, and many brochures in a *Guide for Parents* series) and Sylvania in Danvers, Massachusetts (*How to Get Your Kids Excited About Reading*). A wealth of information for parents and teachers is contained in Marie M. Clay's *Becoming Literate* (1991), Heineman.

Of additional interest are the following two reports: *An Imperiled Generation: Saving Urban Schools* (1988) by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Princeton, New Jersey, and *Education, Urban Development and Local Initiatives* (1983) by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris.

Allen Berger is the Heckert Professor of Reading and Writing at Miami University. He extends his appreciation to Teens for Literacy liaison-teachers: Pat Priore, Thelma Davis, and Joel Santos, all of the Cincinnati Public Schools; and Becky Oswalt and Becky Lawson, respectively, of the Middletown and Hamilton, Ohio, School Districts.